For many years medicine has been seen as a profession far removed from glamour and popular culture, but in recent years the TV show Dr House has popularized the world of diagnostic medicine.

Week after week, he unfailingly manages to diagnose even the most unusual of diseases and even has time for some fun and games. However, life in the real world is slightly different.

Diagnostic medicine is predominantly the realm of general practitioners, or family doctors who are usually the first contact between the patient and the medical professionals who are there to cure them. The priority for a GP is to diagnose the patient as quickly and accurately as possible, and to do this they will need to examine the patient and study the symptoms which the patient has. If a patient is presenting with a rash, then there is a good chance the doctor is looking at nothing more serious than an allergic reaction.

Correctly diagnosing a patient is no easy matter, and takes a great deal of hard work - something which Dr House fails to show. There are thousands of possible medical conditions, many of which show some of the same common symptoms such as vomiting or nausea, so in diagnosing a patient a doctor must look at the big picture of all symptoms together rather than individually.

In doing this most diagnostic examinations will take the symptoms you have, the symptoms you had as well as your physical and mental state into account. So the fact that the patient has worked a 60-hour working week and is feeling fatigued can be just as important to ascertaining the problem as the fact he has a poor diet and has had constipation for the last three days.

It takes years of study and many more years of practice to be able to work effectively in diagnostic medicine as to the untrained, and even trained eye two very different symptoms can present in a surprisingly similar way. If we take the example of a bruise and a lesion, the causes and meanings of which can be completely different but may appear to be almost identical, and it is only through practice and knowing what you are looking for that you can see the difference.

Most of the time, the diagnosis will show a common illness for which the doctor will prescribe something to help like: painkillers to stop an ache or barbiturates to relieve insomnia but some visits may result in nothing more that some good advice like: go to bed and rest if the patient is suffering from the common cold.
Of course with so many viruses, bacteria, conditions and disorders it is impossible for one doctor to be able to diagnose everyone so if your GP is in doubt he will refer you to a specialist who will be able to carry out tests to find the cause of that tingling sensation in your foot.

Unfortunately, more and more people are turning to the internet to help with their diagnosis rather than visiting their family doctor. Admittedly, it may save time and money - but a computer is unable to analyze the symptoms and compare them to your medical history, so by simply stating that you are running a fever - you could be told there is nothing wrong, or you could be told you are dying.

So even though the real doctors may be less entertaining than Dr House, if you feel that something is wrong, you are much better off going to your local clinic than jumping online.

**Discussion Questions**

Why do you think medical TV shows like Dr House are so popular?

What difficulties do you think general practitioners face in diagnosing patients?

Have you ever received a diagnosis you didn't agree with? What happened?